

## Reluctant Partners:

### African Americans and the Origins of the Special Relationship

This article assesses the overwhelmingly negative reaction of African Americans to the speech delivered by Winston Churchill in Fulton, Missouri, in March 1947. It shows that black intellectuals and activists fervently opposed the Anglo-American alliance championed by the former prime minister because they believed it a cynical attempt to buttress an exploitative overseas empire that Britain could no longer afford. African Americans considered Churchill a racist intent on preserving white global hegemony and suppressing the democratic aspirations of people of colour. Despite their initial optimism about the Attlee government elected to power in July 1945, they became almost as mistrustful of the Labour Party as they did the Conservatives. In demonstrating how African Americans considered the Anglo-American alliance to be a means of propagating white racism, the article provides a new perspective on grassroots resistance to the Special Relationship, emphasising tensions between diplomatic elites and ordinary citizens.

**Keywords:** Special Relationship; African Americans; Winston Churchill; Fulton speech; decolonization

John Bull cheerfully strolls along, an insouciant whistle emanating from his lips. There is something wrong, however. Look closer, and the ground beneath John's feet turns out not to be made of earth, but of the bodies of Britain's colonial subjects, bent and broken under the weight of his heel. In his hand, he also clutches a briefcase on which are written the words 'Churchill's Speech'. Underneath the ghastly image is a clearly rhetorical question, 'Shall we help to perpetuate this?' This cartoon, published in the *Baltimore Afro-American* in March 1946, encapsulates the rancorous reaction of many African Americans to the address delivered that month by Winston Churchill in Fulton, Missouri, in which Britain's former prime minister claimed that an 'iron curtain' had descended across Europe and called for an Anglo-American alliance to protect from further Soviet expansionism.<sup>1</sup>

The scathing response of African Americans to the Fulton speech provides a new perspective on the uncertain evolution of the 'Special Relationship' between Britain and the

United States. In concentrating on diplomatic elites and to a lesser extent the mainstream press, scholars have paid little attention to black voices in transatlantic political dialogue. The strength of African American opposition both to the Fulton speech and to proposed US financial aid to Britain nonetheless demonstrates the fragility of popular support for the nascent Anglo-American alliance. Viewed from a post-Cold War perspective, the Special Relationship seems preordained. Yet by resisting the temptation to read history backwards and focusing on events and their interpretation at the time, the emergence of the Anglo-American alliance appears much more contingent. Historians have demonstrated the apathy, scepticism and outright hostility on both sides of the Atlantic to Churchill's speech.<sup>2</sup> The most clamorous opposition of all came from African Americans and their arguments against an alliance with Britain placed far greater emphasis on issues of race and empire.

Black antipathy focused directly on the personality and politics of Churchill. African Americans loathed the former prime minister. That aversion owed to what they believed was a racism that had undermined his wartime rhetoric. The Fulton address was, in their opinion, a cynical attempt on the part of Britain's erstwhile prime minister to secure American support for the maintenance of an overseas empire that it could no longer afford. Far from protecting democracy against the threat posed by the Soviet Union, Churchill's ulterior motive was to re-establish the pre-war global order of white racial supremacy. This distrust of British intentions was almost universal among African Americans. Yet while many African Americans considered Britain an imperial bully, there was a competing notion of the country that commanded considerable currency among black intellectuals and activists. Influenced by its long tradition as one of the leading international critics of US racism, some African Americans regarded Britain as a force for progressive reform that could prove a powerful champion of the post-war civil rights movement. However, neither of these conflicting constructions of Britain reconciled African Americans to the nascent Special Relationship.

Their profound hostility towards the embryonic Anglo-American alliance demonstrates the extent to which it was an elite enterprise rather than an expression of popular will. African Americans had little influence over the emergent alliance but that is itself significant. Their fundamental lack of cultural or historical affinity with Britain underlines the limitations of the Special Relationship as an ideological rather than politically strategic force.

African American antagonism towards the prospect of an alliance between Britain and the United States had its origins in the Second World War. African Americans had by the 1940s come to believe that their own domestic struggle against racism was closely bound to the broader global challenge to western imperialism. Black activists in the United States drew a particularly close analogy between Jim Crow practices in their own country and British colonial rule in India. According to Max Yergen of the National Negro Congress, ‘The cup from which the Indian masses have drunk is also pressed to the lips of Negro Americans and its bitter taste lingers. Whether it be discrimination in terms of caste, race or color, the Negro people know the sting of the lash which India’s millions have felt.’ For African Americans, India was the most important link in the chain connecting the non-white peoples of the world in their crusade for democracy and independence. Establishing India’s right to self-governance would galvanise the nationalist movements across the African continent, the spiritual and ancestral homeland of black Americans. As Yergen concluded, ‘Whatever advanced policy is put into operation there, is bound to affect other great colonial areas like Africa. We Negroes have a deep interest in that continent of our fathers.’ Moreover, the civil disobedience tactics used by Gandhi against the British provided inspiration to African Americans in their own domestic struggle for the full rights of citizenship.<sup>3</sup>

The wartime rhetoric of Allied leaders gave hope to the global vision of African Americans. In August 1941, Churchill and US president Franklin Roosevelt issued the Atlantic Charter, a joint declaration of British and American war aims that included the right

to self-determination. The Charter raised African American expectations of a new commitment by the western powers to promote the dignity and human rights of people throughout the world. In their opinion, the Charter compelled the United States to secure the social and political rights of its black population at home and Britain to secure self-government for its colonised subjects abroad. A cartoon by black artist Charles Alston captured African Americans' excited sense of the Atlantic Charter's historical significance, portraying the ghost of Abraham Lincoln standing over Churchill and Roosevelt as they signed the document and proclaiming 'A Second Emancipation Proclamation!!'<sup>4</sup>

When Churchill announced to the House of Commons on 9 September 1941 that the Charter applied only to the people of Europe living under Nazi occupation, African Americans angrily accused him of undermining the cause of freedom and democracy for which Allied forces were supposedly fighting.<sup>5</sup> At a time when their own government moderated its criticism of British imperialism, African Americans were unrestrained in condemning Churchill for his selective application of the Charter. In response to the Prime Minister's proclamation that he would not oversee the disintegration of the British Empire, the *Chicago Defender* asserted that, 'Black America is truly shocked by the bold and brazen stand by Churchill. We have never known or believed him a friend but we hoped that he as well as the world is learning about democracy from the very "blood sweat and tears" of war.'<sup>6</sup>

If Churchill's interpretation of the Atlantic Charter had fuelled the smouldering mistrust of African Americans, then the Fulton speech fanned the flames of their anger. For black political commentators, the address fortified their conviction that the former prime minister was a fanatical imperialist who regarded democracy as the preserve of white westerners. African American newspapers collectively interpreted the speech as a cynical attempt to perpetuate British imperialism and thereby deny oppressed colonial peoples the

freedoms for which they had fought as part of the Allied war effort. In the words of one black newspaper, ‘The rule of people by other people is not the freedom that colored peoples, who fought with the United Nations, fought to preserve.’<sup>7</sup>

The economic ruin suffered by Britain as a result of six years of warfare had rendered its empire unsustainable without financial and military support. Rather than admit the end of empire, Churchill had, in the opinion of African Americans, resuscitated ideas of transatlantic racial kinship in order to pass the financial and military burden of maintaining white global supremacy to the American government. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) led the chorus of opposition to the speech, reacting furiously to what it interpreted as an attempt by the British to re-establish the pre-war imperial order through the surrogate rule of the United States.<sup>8</sup> Black newspaper columnists sounded the same notes of criticism. If Churchill had his way, they concluded, American troops—including African Americans—would be the ones deployed to suppress nationalist protest in Burma, India and Palestine.<sup>9</sup> In an admittedly outrageous caricature of British society that emphasised class as much as race, black trade union leader Ferdinand C. Smith proclaimed that Churchill expected Americans who had ‘just fought a war to destroy fascism and tyranny’ to ‘send their sons to die to preserve “prerogative” British lords, dukes and earls, still plotting in their many castles to suppress the natural aspirations of the Indian, African, Chinese and Indonesian people’.<sup>10</sup> Black political leader and polymath W. E. B. Du Bois similarly and more succinctly described Churchill’s speech as ‘this siren song of the British aristocracy’ luring American soldiers to their deaths in foreign lands.<sup>11</sup>

The black press also dismissed Churchill’s rationalisation for an Anglo-American alliance as a buttress against the global threat posed by the Soviet Union, regarding this as a smokescreen meant to conceal the white supremacist doctrine that underpinned the speech. Although Churchill placed his emphasis on the common cultural heritage shared by the

peoples of Britain and the United States, African Americans interpreted the Fulton address as a brazen rearticulation of the racial Anglo-Saxonism with which the two nations justified wars of imperial conquest half a century earlier.<sup>12</sup> ‘When Mr. Churchill talks about democracy,’ asserted the *Los Angeles Sentinel*, ‘he means democracy for Europeans or descendants of Europeans.’<sup>13</sup> Speaking at a meeting of the Council on African Affairs in Los Angeles, black artist and activist Paul Robeson similarly alleged that Churchill wanted to impose a new white hegemonic order that would render Allied victory a defeat for the democratic aspirations of people of colour. The Fulton speech, he concluded, was nothing less than an ‘Anglo-Saxon world domination scheme’.<sup>14</sup>

The intrinsically racist nature of the speech was a recurring theme of black press coverage. Some commentators went so far as to accuse Churchill of having fought the Second World War not because he opposed the racial fanaticism of the Nazis but simply to remove an imperialist rival to Britain. According to John Robert Badger, the British statesman wanted to encourage whites on both sides of the Atlantic to ‘assume the task of policing and ordering the entire world to their way of life’. The Union Jack, he concluded, was no better than the Swastika. ‘It was Hitler, remember, who promulgated the myth of the Aryans as the “chosen people” for such a task. Hitler’s Germans were to do precisely what Churchill now urges Britons and Americans to do.’ Writing in the *Pittsburgh Courier*, black author J. A. Rodgers evoked the spectres of domestic and international white supremacy, denouncing Churchill for his ‘crazy KuKlux philosophy’ and concluding that ‘though he spouts democracy, he is a fascist at heart’.<sup>15</sup> In an editorial likening Britain’s wartime leader to two of Mississippi’s most notorious white supremacist politicians, the *Kansas City Plaindealer* also concluded that, ‘Hitler was never more bent on white supremacy than Churchill and Bilbo and Rankin... The world knows that the greatest difference between the living fascists and the dead ones resides in the fact that the dead ones were caught.’<sup>16</sup>

African Americans not only denounced the content of Churchill's speech, but also saw symbolic meaning in his choice of location. The black press pointed out that Missouri state law prohibited African Americans from the campus of Westminster College. Churchill had addressed a racially exclusive audience at an institution that was a citadel of white privilege. His decision to speak at a college that practiced Jim Crow policies underlined the connection between the domestic racism of the United States and the overseas exploitation of the British.<sup>17</sup>

For black political commentators, the prospect of an Anglo-American alliance therefore threatened to invert US foreign policy, turning the country from an advocate of national sovereignty for all people into an enforcer of imperialist oppression. The United States had long been a staunch critic of British imperialism. African Americans feared that an Anglo-American alliance would bring about a strategic silence on the part of the British and US governments about each other's racial policies in the interest of maintaining a united front against the Soviet Union. As black journalist Roy Ottley asserted, British officials evinced 'a growing appreciation of America's racial problems, as a kind of *quid pro quo* for American silence about Britain's racial problems'.<sup>18</sup> Sociologist Horace Clayton even claimed that Washington had authorised a British diplomatic mission to assess black opinion on its imperial policies 'and to devise means of converting them to the English point of view'. The sociologist gave no corroborating evidence, but his claim emphasises the profound mistrust of African Americans towards Britain's intentions.<sup>19</sup>

Clayton was not entirely wrong to suspect the British of scheming to protect their colonial interests. At almost the same time as his article appeared in the *Pittsburgh Courier*, the British Cabinet determined on a course of action to prevent the United Nations from intervening to protect the rights of Indians in South Africa. The strategy focused on persuading the American representatives to recognise that such action would set a precedent

for possible intercession in their own country's racial affairs. 'One such intervention began,' ministers agreed, 'it would be difficult to set limits to it. Other Governments should see the weight of this argument. Thus, the United States Government would hardly welcome discussion by the United Nations of the rights of negroes in the United States.'<sup>20</sup>

The enthusiasm for the alliance shown by US Secretary of State James F. Byrnes, a diehard segregationist from South Carolina, compounded African American anxieties that its purpose was to perpetuate white global hegemony.<sup>21</sup> White southerners were enthusiastic supporters of the Special Relationship, which owed not only to the fact that Britain was one of the largest markets for their region's trade exports, but also because of what sociologist Alfred Hero described as 'a sentimental identification with the British' rooted in a sense of common racial ancestry. Churchill's admiration for Confederate military commanders such as Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson strengthened the bond. His determination to preserve the British Empire also provided a sense of common cause to segregationists increasingly isolated within their own country. In contrast to many northerners who resisted an entangling alliance with Britain, the staunch anti-communism of white southerners also encouraged their receptiveness to the need for joint diplomatic and military intervention.<sup>22</sup>

In denouncing British racism, African Americans focused entirely on the country's colonial policies. Had they been aware of the discrimination suffered by people of colour within Britain's own borders, it would presumably have strengthened their antipathy towards Churchill's vision of a Special Relationship. However, they appear to have been almost entirely uninformed about domestic racial politics in Britain. Even NAACP executive secretary Walter White, who had served as a war correspondent in Britain during 1944, had nothing to say on the matter in his analysis of race issues in the European theatre of war, *A Rising Wind*.<sup>23</sup> This ignorance is not surprising given the smallness of the West Indian population in Britain, which stood at only 15,000 in 1951. It was only in the wake of the



arrival of the first post-war migrants from the Caribbean that African Americans showed any awareness of, and interest in, Britain's non-white population. A letter that W. E. B. Du Bois is presumed to have written to Clement Attlee in August 1948 protested the recent rioting against black seamen in Liverpool and warned of the damage to Britain's international reputation if those responsible were not arrested, tried and convicted.<sup>24</sup> Black journalist Roi Ottley also surveyed British race relations as part of a larger study of Europe published in the early 1950s. His depressing analysis suggested that while white Britons were outspoken in their criticism of American race relations, they were blind to their own prejudices towards the migrants newly arrived on their shores.<sup>25</sup> For the most part, however, African Americans were largely oblivious to the plight of Britain's black populace. When Paul Robeson, a champion of black internationalism, toured Britain in 1949, he upset pioneering civil rights organisation the League of Coloured Peoples by ignoring their repeated requests for support.<sup>26</sup>

Black attitudes towards the Soviet Union also informed reactions to the Fulton address. African Americans doubted the sincerity of the speech because they did not believe that the Soviet Union endangered global peace and democracy. On the contrary, they considered the prospect of an Anglo-American alliance as a gratuitous act of provocation that threatened to cause the very conflict Churchill claimed it would prevent. A special relationship between Britain and the United States laid the foundations not for a 'Temple of Peace' as the former prime minister put it but for renewed warfare.<sup>27</sup>

At the time of the Fulton speech, the first chills of the Cold War had yet to send a shiver to the American people. Few regarded the Soviet Union as a serious threat to the West since the country was, in their opinion, focused on national self-recovery. An alliance between Britain and the United States would therefore weaken rather than strengthen global security by unnecessarily antagonising the Soviets. The African American press shared these

opinions, asserting that the Soviet Union represented no challenge even to the furthest defensive outposts of the United States and, in an articulation of their commitment to the new internationalism that they believed would bring lasting world peace, that any tensions between the two nations should be resolved through the newly constituted United Nations.<sup>28</sup> According to the *Chicago Defender*, the Fulton speech was little short of a *casus belli*. An alliance formed in opposition to the Soviet Union would have catastrophic consequences, rendering ‘World War III...a certainty’. African American congressman Adam Clayton Powell similarly regarded the concept of a Special Relationship as ‘a form of super-nationalism based on race’ that would not only antagonise the Soviet Union but also grant it permanent superiority over the West by attracting millions of people of colour living under British colonial rule to the communist cause.<sup>29</sup>

The Soviet Union had a powerful pull on the collective imagination of African Americans themselves. As black journalist George McCray observed, ‘In the minds of most Negroes there is a small soft spot for Russia because most of us believe the Russians do not believe in nor practice racial discrimination.’<sup>30</sup> In contrast to most white Americans, African Americans therefore saw the Soviet Union not only in less negative terms than Churchill, but also positively praised the country for its supposed colour-blindness. African American artistic and cultural luminaries, including the author Langston Hughes and most prominently the actor and singer Paul Robeson, eulogised the racial inclusiveness and progressivism of the Soviet Union, which they contrasted with the discriminatory colonial practices of the British and domestic policies of their own government.<sup>31</sup> The warm disposition of many African American political commentators towards the Soviet Union accounts for their widespread approval of Stalin’s denunciation of the Fulton speech.<sup>32</sup>

Even those African Americans who were more circumspect in their appraisal of the Soviet Union considered Churchill a hypocrite for denouncing its supposed tyranny while his

own country denied democratic rights to millions of colonial subjects around the world. In contrast to the effusive praise bestowed on the Soviet Union by the likes of W. E. B. Du Bois and Paul Robeson, sociologist Horace R. Cayton observed that ‘nobody, especially Russia, is under any illusions about the real essence of democracy in Russia. It just doesn’t exist in the sense that we know it.’ According to Cayton, the Soviets made no pretence to protecting and promoting human rights such as the freedoms of speech, press or assembly. Nor, however, did they discriminate between and against citizens because of their skin colour. Rather, ‘they have worked out a formula for seeing that all peoples in spite of color or race get just about an equal break’. By contrast, the racist policies of Britain and the United States belied their rhetorical claims to champion peace and democracy.<sup>33</sup> An editorial in the *New Journal and Guide* likewise concluded that while Churchill warned against Soviet expansionism, ‘any examination of Great Britain’s foreign policy and the execution and administration of her colonial policy will reveal that some of the methods now being utilized by the Soviets are puny by comparison.’ The Russian bear was far from tame, but the British lion was still the fiercer predator.<sup>34</sup>

Although Churchill was the particular focus of their anger and distrust, African Americans opposed an alliance with Britain regardless of who ran its government. Britain’s wartime leader was no longer prime minister by the time he delivered the Fulton speech. The election of a Labour administration led by Clement Attlee in July 1945 initially gave hope to African Americans that Britain would belatedly extend the Atlantic Charter beyond Europe to secure national self-determination for its imperial subjects. However, this initial optimism soon turned to bitter disappointment.

African American leaders’ early encounters with the Labour Party had not proven especially encouraging. When Walter White and W. E. B. Du Bois travelled to London to attend the second Pan African Congress in 1921, they also arranged a meeting with Labour’s

National Executive Committee. Their efforts to secure a clear statement in support of ameliorating the worst conditions of colonial rule ended in failure, Labour leader Ramsay MacDonald parrying the African Americans' intellectual punches with 'vague evasions'. Labour members were also apparently reluctant to speak out against racial discrimination in the United States for fear it would provoke the American government intervention on the Irish question.<sup>35</sup>

Labour's surprise post-war election victory nonetheless kindled renewed optimism among African Americans for the rapid restoration of self-rule to Britain's colonies. This expectation owed substantially to wartime statements made by Clement Attlee in which, contrastingly with Churchill, he had endorsed the universal application of the Atlantic Charter. In an address widely reported by the African American press, the Labour leader had informed the West African Students' Union that the freedoms for which Allied forces were fighting were for the benefit of all people, regardless of race.<sup>36</sup> Attlee's accession to the British premiership therefore aroused much excitement and anticipation on the part of African American commentators. 'To the common men of the world, to 750,000,000 exploited and underprivileged black and brown peoples in European colonies,' proclaimed the *Chicago Defender*, 'the Labor victory may mean the lifting of the longest blackout of freedom ever imposed in an Empire. It is the most hopeful promise to come out of this war.' Retaining the parallel between British colonialism and American racism, the newspaper expressed its hope that Attlee's election represented the end of 'Jim Crow with a cockney accent'.<sup>37</sup> Enthusiasm for the new administration remained strong when the *Afro-American* reported from the Labour Party Conference in Bournemouth the following summer, praising rank-and-file members for loudly repudiating both British imperialism and an Anglo-American alliance against the Soviet Union.<sup>38</sup>

The sweet promise of Labour's election victory nonetheless soon turned to sour disillusionment. African Americans were particularly critical of the Attlee government's reluctance to yield to American pressure to resettle tens of thousands of Jewish refugees in Palestine. African Americans had since the 1930s drawn parallels between their own plight and that of the Jewish victims of Nazi oppression, which made them strong proponents of resettlement. The outspoken resistance of Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin therefore drew the fire of African American editorial writers. His claim that Americans supported resettlement because they did not want any more Jews in New York elicited indignant comparisons with Hitler. As one editorial asserted, Bevin was 'a rowdy who speaks gutter-snipe billingsgate to propagate anti-semitism and to slur one of the many peoples which are America's glory'.<sup>39</sup>

The African American press also reacted angrily to reports that the Labour government was actually attempting to aggrandise Britain's overseas empire. Black newspapers condemned a proposal from Bevin to annex the Ethiopian region of Ogaden, under military control since the defeat of Italian forces during the war, to a united Somali state governed by British colonial administrators.<sup>40</sup> Although Britain abandoned the plan in the face of opposition from Washington, the African American press continued to report regularly on the suppression of nationalist uprisings in other parts of the British Empire, which it regarded as a betrayal of Attlee's wartime rhetoric.<sup>41</sup> Although the Prime Minister eventually received praise for securing Indian independence in 1947, the black press condemned the new public works programme instituted to improve its economy as coming 'close to a system of slave labor'.<sup>42</sup>

The failure of the Labour government to fulfil African Americans' expectations convinced them that the British were all, regardless of party political affiliation, untrustworthy imperialists. As the *Cleveland Call and Post* concluded, 'They do not intend to give in one inch in granting improved citizenship to these people unless they are absolutely

forced to do so.’<sup>43</sup> The *Chicago Defender* was even more acidic in its evaluation of the Attlee administration. ‘The Labor Party may be Socialist at home,’ it opined, ‘but they, like Churchill, are Tories abroad.’<sup>44</sup>

This mistrust of the entire Westminster establishment fuelled African Americans’ fervent resistance to the proposed financial loan to Britain because they believed Labour as much as the Conservatives would use it not only to rebuild the country’s war-shattered economy, but also to buttress its otherwise unaffordable empire. In contrast to conservative whites, who feared that the Attlee administration would use American dollars to nationalise private industry, African Americans were enthusiastic about the Labour government’s experiment in democratic socialism. It was one thing to improve the material condition of the British people through the creation of a welfare state, but another altogether to secure their renewed prosperity through the further exploitation of the colonies. The NAACP lobbied Washington to impose the condition that the British government would not use a loan to sustain its faltering colonial administrations.<sup>45</sup> Mistrust of how the British government would spend the loan led other African Americans to oppose financial support outright. Congressman Adam Clayton Powell deplored the prospect of the United States paying to prop up the British Empire from the floor of the House of Representatives.<sup>46</sup> Black newspapers applied further pressure. ‘Should We Lend Billions For This?’ asked a *Chicago Defender* editorial on the British Empire which answered its own question with a resounding no. Correspondent Clifford W. Smith was even more emphatic. In language analogous with that of reactionary whites, he declared that, ‘Every red blooded American should put forth every effort to defeat the proposed...loan that is coming up soon for debate in both the House of Representatives and the Senate.’<sup>47</sup> Associated Negro Press journalist Dean Gordon B. Hancock concurred, claiming that it would be better to let burn Britain’s ‘international chestnuts we are pulling out of the fire’.<sup>48</sup>

African Americans were also unenthusiastic about the Marshall Plan, regarding the reconstruction of the war torn economies of Western Europe, including Britain, as less of a government priority than remedying racial problems closer to home. It would be far better to invest the money, claimed one newspaper, in building a modern infrastructure for the impoverished black population of the US Virgin Islands.<sup>49</sup> Opinion polls conducted in the late 1940s consistently demonstrated a lack of popular support in the United States for further financial support to Britain. African Americans expressed more implacable opposition than any other element of the population. An American Institute of Public Opinion poll in 1949 found that only 14 per cent of white citizens favoured any additional loan to Britain. The figure for African Americans was only one in ten.<sup>50</sup>

For all their antipathy towards Britain as an imperial tyrant, there was nonetheless another perception of the country that had long held a powerful hold on African Americans' collective imagination. This was of a progressive nation that had for more than a century been one of the most trenchant international critics of American racism. That reputation had lured black activists to its shores in the expectation of enlisting powerful support for their cause: first abolitionists such as Frederick Douglass and William Wells Brown during the 1840s and then the anti-lynching campaigner Ida B. Wells in the 1890s.<sup>51</sup> Within the lifetimes of contemporary African American activists, British citizens had taken to the streets of London in a show of solidarity with the Scottsboro Boys, nine black teenagers accused of raping two white women in Alabama.<sup>52</sup> Most recently of all, the British people had defied not only the high command of the US army, but also their own government, in treating African American GIs with dignity and respect during the Second World War. (Black newspapers unfortunately provide little insight into the attitude of African American veterans towards the Special Relationship, an important area for future research.)<sup>53</sup>

No one articulated this sense of transatlantic solidarity between ordinary Britons and African Americans more eloquently than performing artist and political activist Paul Robeson. For a time during the 1930s, he had made Britain his home. There he had developed a potent kinship with the country's white working class that contrasted with his scathing criticism of the imperial policies pursued by its political elite. 'If in Britain there were those who lived by plundering the colonial peoples,' he later wrote, 'there were also the many millions who earned their bread by honest toil. And even as I grew to feel more Negro in spirit, or African as I put it then, I also came to feel a sense of oneness with the white working people whom I came to know and love.'<sup>54</sup>

The closeness of political elites in London and Washington threatened the capacity of these ordinary Britons to speak out against American racism. Black activists worried that Britain's increasing reliance on American financial and military support would curtail progressive criticism of Jim Crow racism. The more liberal elements of British society would better serve the civil rights cause if their country *avoided* an alliance with the United States. As journalist George Padmore proclaimed, 'Ever since Britain's economic dependence upon the United States for loans on the one hand, and military reliance in the event of a third World War on the other hand, the Labor Government has discouraged the press of this country openly criticizing America's shameful and disgraceful treatment of her colored population.'<sup>55</sup> Roi Ottley expressed the same sentiment that British reliance on the United States compromised criticism of African Americans' oppression. Britons 'would undoubtedly confront America with the ludicrous role she often plays, posturing about "democracy" and "freedom," if they 'did not so urgently need American dollars, diplomatic and military cooperation'.<sup>56</sup>

Ottley and Padmore were right to believe that the British dared not bite the hand that fed. The Attlee administration declined numerous representations from African American



activists to lobby Washington on their behalf.<sup>57</sup> A memorandum issued to British Embassy officials in Washington during October 1945 instructed that, 'We should not in public make comparisons with the U.S. or critical reference to U.S. domestic affairs, or take sides in domestic political issues; nor should we become involved in controversy on racial and religious subjects.'<sup>58</sup>

African Americans never evinced the same level of support for the Special Relationship as the wider US population. In August 1949, the American Institute of Public Opinion conducted a poll that asked whether it made much difference to the United States whether Britain remained a strong nation. Sixty-six per cent of white respondents answered yes, compared to 55 per cent of African Americans.<sup>59</sup>

The fact that more than half of those black people polled responded positively nonetheless represented a substantial shift in opinion and a closing of the divide with white attitudes. Several factors account for this stronger commitment to the Anglo-American alliance. The first was the onset of the Cold War. As relations between the United States and the Soviet Union deteriorated from an autumnal chill to a wintry freeze, African Americans embraced the cold war consensus. A loss of faith in communism as a colour-blind alternative to western capitalism led many African Americans to support a western containment policy against Soviet incursion into the African continent. For African Americans who retained their leftist radicalism, the intensification of the domestic cold war also made it politically expedient to temper criticism of US foreign policy. Black militants under suspicion by their own government needed to soften their supranational identity as members of the African diaspora and instead emphasise their patriotic loyalty to the United States.

Positive action by the British also disposed African Americans more favourably towards the Special Relationship. Albeit begrudging, the black press did concede that the Attlee government had made positive advances towards decolonisation. Another factor was

that while the British establishment continued to curtail criticism of American race relations, progressive voices penetrated this official silence to speak out in support of black civil rights.

British citizens mobilized grassroots opposition to some of the most egregious acts of American racial injustice. One particular cause célèbre was a sentence of death by electric chair passed down by a Mississippi court in January 1947 on two black teenagers, James Lewis and Charles Trudell, found guilty of murdering their white employer. Hundreds of British citizens petitioned the US embassy in Grosvenor Square for clemency. Compounding their moral outrage was an angry resentment at what they regarded as the double standards of a country that criticised British imperial rule while oppressing its own minority populations. As one respondent to the Mass Observation social research organisation, which recorded the opinions of everyday people, exclaimed: ‘The Americans laugh at our Imperialism but they should look at their own democracy with its colour bar. Two fourteen year old black boys were sentenced to death, and they talk.’ Labour MPs Richard Crossman and Tom Driberg also telegrammed President Truman, urging him to intervene in order to ‘protect basic human rights’, a phrase that denoted Britain honouring rather than undermining the new internationalist framework of governance established through the United Nations.<sup>60</sup> White Britons also championed the cause of the Trenton Six, black defendants sentenced to death for the murder of a white shopkeeper. In May 1949, Paul Robeson performed a concert at the New International Club in Manchester’s Moss Side to raise funds for their defence. Liberal Britons also established a committee to protest travel restrictions imposed on Robeson by the US government.<sup>61</sup>

These actions contributed to a reassessment of the United States’ relationship with Britain. In September 1949, the Kansas City *Plaindealer* published ‘A Plea for Understanding’, in which it attempted to reeducate its readership about the virtues of an Anglo-American alliance. ‘We are more critical of Britain than we are of any other nation,’

the article began in a manner familiar to readers only to off-balance them by continuing, ‘just in the same way as we are more critical of our families than of our friends’. Britain, the newspaper proclaimed, was a force for good in the world. First, long before the United States intervened in the Second World War, it had endured terrible deprivation as it stood alone in the fight against fascism; now it was also an ally in another conflict to defend democracy, this time from communism. ‘Anglo-American understanding is more than something we should merely want, or something for which, merely in our spare time we ought to work. It is an essential to our way of life—for whether we like it or not, no other country is as close to our ideals and our fundamental beliefs in the sanctity of the individual and the responsibility of government to the people.’ Winston Churchill could not have been more pleased with the article if he had written it himself.<sup>62</sup>

The Anglophobia of the late 1940s had not entirely receded. Many African Americans retained an ambivalent attitude towards their country’s transatlantic ally. The increasingly desperate efforts of the British government to preserve its crumbling empire continued to draw fire from African Americans during the post-war era. The US government opposed British and French over Suez in 1956, but African Americans expressed a particularly strong and instinctive support for Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser. NAACP executive secretary Roy Wilkins used his speech at the organisation’s annual convention in San Francisco to celebrate British and French defeat in Egypt, which had taken the world a step further towards ‘rooting out the apostles of white supremacy’.<sup>63</sup>

African Americans also never forgave Churchill for what they saw as his attempt to sustain a white imperialist world order through a diplomatic and military alliance between Britain and the United States. This included their opposition to John F. Kennedy bestowing the former prime minister with honorary US citizenship while he was still alive and to the unveiling of a commemorative statue in Washington after he was dead. Obituaries of the late

prime minister praised his many talents as a statesman but still stressed that his stubborn refusal to recognise the basic rights of people of colour around the world. As the *Chicago Defender* concluded, ‘Despite his brilliance and universalism, he saw the world only in the perspective of advancing white civilization.’<sup>64</sup> Almost a decade later, the same newspaper published an article ‘We remember Churchill’. It was not fondly. Focusing on his efforts to form an Anglo-American alliance, it concluded: ‘Africa and the rest of the black world have no apology to make for not bowing in tribute to Winston Churchill, the great white Father whose power and gift of oratory we acknowledge, but whose constricted field of vision and lack of concern for those struggling to be free, we deplore. To have followed the white world in its inordinate adulations would have been an indecent, intolerable display of hypocrisy.’<sup>65</sup>

Yet African American dislike of Churchill should not obscure the fact that differences over race relations between Britons and Americans created a lasting fault-line within the post-war Special Relationship. Opinion polls conducted in the 1950s showed that Britain was one of the most trenchant international critics of American race relations.<sup>66</sup> British commentators emphasised not only the ethical dimension of the civil rights cause, but also a strategic concern that the United States had compromised the containment of communist expansion by allowing the practice of racial discrimination to tarnish its position as leader of the free world. Others continued to bristle at American criticism of British colonial rule, claiming that the persistence of Jim Crow denied the United States any claim to the moral high ground.<sup>67</sup>

A new development complicated matters further. On 22 June 1948, the *MV Empire Windrush* arrived at Tilbury docks with 492 Jamaican passengers aboard. The migration of tens of thousands of people from Britain’s colonies to the Mother Country had a profound influence on the transatlantic dialogue about race. Black people on both sides of the Atlantic came to see themselves as allies in a larger global resistance movement against white

supremacy, trading activists, tactics and publicity. African Americans therefore became partners in an alternative Anglo-American alliance, one based on shared racial identity but with the purpose to pull down rather than prop up the existing order. This expression of transnational racial solidarity demonstrates that within the broader context of transatlantic relations there was not one but many Special Relationships.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 'Shall We Help to Perpetuate This?', editorial cartoon, *Baltimore Afro-American*, 12 March 1946.

<sup>2</sup> On the importance of historical contingency, see Coral Bell, *Debatable Alliance: An essay in Anglo-American relations* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), 10; C. J. Bartlett, *'The Special Relationship': A Political History of Anglo-American Relations since 1945* (London and New York: Longman, 1992), 24. For more on the US reaction to the speech, see Barbara Leaming, *Churchill Defiant: Fighting On 1945-1955* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010), 67-9; John E. Moser, *Twisting the Lion's Tail: Anglophobia in the United States, 1921-48* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999), 177-9.

<sup>3</sup> Max Yergen, 'Negro See His Future Linked To Independence For 400 Million, *Chicago Defender*, 26 September 1942. For further analysis of the Atlantic Charter, see Elizabeth Borgwardt, *A New Deal for the World: America's Vision for Human Rights* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> Charles Alston, 'A Second Emancipation Proclamation!!', 1943 Records of the Office of War Information, 1926-1951, Record Group 208; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD [online version available through the Archival Research Catalog (ARC identifier 535700) at [www.archives.gov](http://www.archives.gov); 20 May 2016].

<sup>5</sup> George Padmore, 'Crisis in the British Empire' *The Crisis* 49, no.7 (July 1942): 236.

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<sup>6</sup> ‘Danger Signs From Overseas’, *Chicago Defender*, 28 November 1942. See also Metz P.

Lochard, ‘Africa’s Problems Of No Concern To Britain’, *Chicago Defender*, 30 August 1941; ‘Mr. Churchill and the Race Question’, *Chicago Defender*, 17 January 1942.

<sup>7</sup> ‘Support Deterred’, *Atlanta Daily World*, 20 March 1946.

<sup>8</sup> On the NAACP statement, see *Negro Star* (Wichita, KS), 15 March 1946.

<sup>9</sup> ‘John Bull, International Bully’, *Chicago Defender*, 24 November 1945, 12; ‘Churchill and Colonials’, *Baltimore Afro-American*, 12 March 1946.

<sup>10</sup> ‘NMU Secretary Hits Churchill Speech As Empire “Smokescreen”’, *Atlanta Daily World*, 10 March 1946.

<sup>11</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, ‘The Winds of Times’, *Chicago Defender*, 23 March 1946.

<sup>12</sup> For further insight into the concept of racial Anglo-Saxonism, see Reginald Horsman, ‘Origins of Racial Anglo-Saxonism in Britain before 1850’, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 37, no.3 (1976): 387-410; Paul A. Kramer, ‘Empires, Exceptions and Anglo-Saxons: Race and Rule between the British and United States Empires, 1880-1910’, *Journal of American History*, 88, no. 4 (2002): 1315-53.

<sup>13</sup> ‘Mr. Churchill’s Chestnuts’, *Los Angeles Sentinel*, 14 March 1946.

<sup>14</sup> ‘Paul Robeson Deplores Churchill’s Imperialist Plot’, *Atlanta Daily World*, 28 March 1946.

<sup>15</sup> John Robert Badger, ‘World View’, *Chicago Defender*, 16 March 1946; *Pittsburgh Courier*, 16 March 1946.

<sup>16</sup> Dean Gordon B. Hancock, ‘Between the Lines’, *Plaindealer* (Kansas City), 10 May 1946. See also Hancock’s ‘Between the Lines’ articles in *Plaindealer*, 31 January and 28 March 1947.

<sup>17</sup> ‘What Churchill Wants’, *Chicago Defender*, 16 March 1946.

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<sup>18</sup> Roi Ottley, *No Green Pastures: The Negro in Europe Today* (London: John Murray, 1952), 41.

<sup>19</sup> Horace R. Cayton, 'Emissaries', *Pittsburgh Courier*, 14 December 1946.

<sup>20</sup> Conclusion of a Meeting of the Cabinet held at 10 Downing Street, S.W.1 on Monday, 4<sup>th</sup> November 1946 at 11 a.m.. CAB 128/6/32.

<sup>21</sup> Brenda Gayle Plummer, *Rising Wind: African Americans and U.S. Foreign Affairs, 1935-1960* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 169.

<sup>22</sup> Joseph A Fry, *Dixie Looks Abroad: The South and U.S. Foreign Relations, 1789-1973* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002), 226-7; Alfred O. Hero, Jr., *The Southerner and World Affairs* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005), 91; Charles P. Roland, *The Confederacy* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1960), 38.

<sup>23</sup> Walter White, *A Rising Wind* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Doran and Company, 1945); Marika Sherwood, 'Walter White and the British: A Lost Opportunity', *Contributions in Black Studies* 9/10 (1990-92): 215-26.

<sup>24</sup> Letter from unidentified correspondence to Clement Attlee, 19 August 1948 (mums312-b118-i367), W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312), Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries. For more information on the riot, see Peter Fryer, *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain* (London: Pluto, 1984), 367-8.

<sup>25</sup> Ottley, *No Green Pastures*, Chapters 2 and 3.

<sup>26</sup> 'British Attack Robeson', *Los Angeles Sentinel*, 30 June 1949.

<sup>27</sup> Penny M. Von Eschen, *Race against Empire: Black Americans and Anticolonialism, 1937-1957* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 96.

<sup>28</sup> 'What Churchill Wants', *Chicago Defender*, 16 March 1946.

<sup>29</sup> 'Rep. Powell Brands Churchill Racist, War Monger', *Chicago Defender*, 23 March 1946.

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- <sup>30</sup> George F. McCray, 'International Politics and Negro Rights', *Plain Dealer*, 29 April 1949.
- <sup>31</sup> *Chicago Defender*, 15 June 1946; 'Great Britain Made Paul Robeson Rich, Claims Press', *Plain Dealer*, 24 June 1949.
- <sup>32</sup> 'Imperialism vs. Peace', *Chicago Defender*, 30 March 1946.
- <sup>33</sup> Horace R. Cayton, 'Imperialism', *Pittsburgh Courier*, 31 January 1948. Cayton expressed similar sentiments in his editorial 'England's Greed', *Pittsburgh Courier*, 9 March 1946.
- <sup>34</sup> *New Journal and Guide* (Norfolk, VA), 16 March 1946.
- <sup>35</sup> Walter White, *A Man Called White: The Autobiography of Walter White* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995), 60-2; Kenneth Robert Janken, *Walter White: Mr. NAACP* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 67.
- <sup>36</sup> Ottley, *No Green Pastures*, 50-1.
- <sup>37</sup> 'England Leaps Ahead', *Chicago Defender*, 1 August 1945.
- <sup>38</sup> S. A. Haynes, 'The Battle for Freedom', *Afro-American*, 22 June 1946.
- <sup>39</sup> 'Defeat In Victory', *New York Amsterdam News*, 22 June 1946. See also Haynes 'The Battle for Freedom', *Afro-American*, 22 June 1946. The Foreign Secretary's comments appear in Peter Weiler, *Ernest Bevin* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1993), 170.
- <sup>40</sup> Chatwood Hall, 'British "Trusteeship Plan in Ethiopia Bitterly Fought"', *Afro-American*, 22 June 1946; 'Foreign Ministers Told British Plot', *Atlanta Daily World*, 10 July 1946; 'Charge Bevin Turn Against Ethiop Cause', *Atlanta Daily World*, 6 August 1946.
- <sup>41</sup> See, for example, 'British Face New Threats', *New York Amsterdam News*, 31 December 1949.
- <sup>42</sup> 'Colored Race Hail India's New Freedom', *Chicago Defender*, 23 August 1947; 'The British Temper', *Chicago Defender*, 13 December 1947.
- <sup>43</sup> 'Britain's Labor Government and the Negro', *Cleveland Call and Post*, 2 August 1947.



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<sup>44</sup> ‘The Labor Party Shows Its Colors’, *Chicago Defender*, 1 September 1945. See A. K.

Jadegba, Council on African Affairs, letter to editor, ‘British Imperialism Gets Round Kicking Around’, *New York Amsterdam News*, 22 June 1946, and the comments of George Padmore in Ottley, *No Green Pastures*, 68.

<sup>45</sup> “‘No Loan to Britain for Imperialism’—NAACP’, *Pittsburgh Courier*, 22 December 1945.

<sup>46</sup> ‘Powell Explains Opposition to British Loan’, *Atlanta Daily World*, 23 July 1946.

<sup>47</sup> ‘Should We Lend Billions For This?’, *Chicago Defender*, 1 June 1946; ‘Churchill’s “Military Alliance” Speech Rapped’, *Chicago Defender*, 13 April 1946.

<sup>48</sup> Dean Gordon B. Hancock, ‘Between the Lines’, *Plaindealer*, 28 March 1947.

<sup>49</sup> ‘Hit Aid to Europe While Virgins Suffer’, *Atlanta Daily World*, 28 November 1947. See also ‘Marshall Plan And Colonies’, *Pittsburgh Courier*, 21 May 1949.

<sup>50</sup> Alfred O. Hero, Jr., ‘American Negroes and U.S. foreign policy: 1937-1967’, in *The African American Voice in U.S. Foreign Policy*, ed. Michael L. Krenn (New York and London: Garland, 1999), 16-20.

<sup>51</sup> Frederick Douglass, ‘England Should Lead the Cause of Emancipation: An Address Delivered in Leeds, England, on December 23, 1846’ in *The Frederick Douglass Papers: Series One—Speeches, Debates, and Interviews*, ed. John Blassingame, et al (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), Vol.I, 474; Sarah L. Silkey, *Black Woman Reformer: Ida B. Wells, Lynching & Transatlantic Activism* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2015).

<sup>52</sup> Susan D. Pennybacker, *From Scottsboro to Munich: Race and Political Culture in 1930s Britain* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009), 16-65; ‘London Negroes Urge U.S. to End Lynching’, *Pittsburgh Courier*, 6 January 1934.

<sup>53</sup> Ottley, *No Green Pastures*, 11, 20-1, 31, 38. See also Graham A. Smith, ‘Jim Crow on the home front, 1942-1945’, *New Community* 8 (1980), 317-328; Christopher Thorne, ‘Britain

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and the black G.I.s: Racial issues and Anglo-American relations in 1942', *New Community* 3 (1974), 262-71.

<sup>54</sup> Paul Robeson, *Here I Stand* (London: Dobson, 1958), 56.

<sup>55</sup> George Padmore, 'World Views', *Chicago Defender*, 1 February 1947.

<sup>56</sup> Roi Ottley, 'U.S. Mask of Piousness Resented by Britain', *Pittsburgh Courier*, 16 November 1946.

<sup>57</sup> Caroline Anstey, 'The Projection of British Socialism: Foreign Office Publicity and American Opinion, 1945-50', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 19 (1984): 426.

<sup>58</sup> Information Office, British Embassy, Washington, 29 October 1945 'Guidance for British Officials', CAB 122/1036.

<sup>59</sup> Hero, 'American Negroes and U.S. foreign policy: 1937-1967', 17.

<sup>60</sup> George Padmore, 'World Views', *Chicago Defender*, 22 February 1947; 'Anti-Americanism', 26.1.47, Mass Observation Archive, The Keep, Falmer, Brighton; Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2000), 234-5.

<sup>61</sup> Robeson, *Here I Stand*, 64-7. For more on the Trenton case, see Cathy D. Knepper, *Jersey Justice: The Story of the Trenton Six* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rivergate Books/Rutgers University Press, 2011).

<sup>62</sup> Ruth Taylor, 'A Plea for Understanding', *Plaindealer*, 30 September 1949.

<sup>63</sup> *Arkansas State Press*, 13 July 1956. See also *Chicago Defender*, 28 August 1956.

<sup>64</sup> 'Winston Churchill', *Chicago Defender*, 25 January 1965. See also the newspaper's earlier editorial, 'Sir Winston Churchill', 9 December 1958.

<sup>65</sup> 'We remember Churchill', *Chicago Defender*, 9 December 1974. .

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<sup>66</sup> Hazel Erskine, “The Polls: World Opinion of U.S. Racial Problems,” in *Race and U.S.*

*Foreign Policy from the Colonial Period to the Present: A Collection of Essays*, ed. Michael L. Krenn (New York and London: Garland, 1998), 275-88.

<sup>67</sup> Mike Sewell, “British Responses to Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Civil Rights Movement, 1954-68,” in *The Making of Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights Movement*, ed. Brian Ward and Tony Badger (Houndmills, Basingstoke, and London: Macmillan, 1996), 194-212.

<sup>68</sup> For a much fuller analysis, see Robin D. G. Kelley and Stephen Tuck, ed., *The Other Special Relationship: Race, Rights, and Riots in Britain and the United States* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).